



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Seeking Justice and Freedom in Belarus”

Tuesday, September 21, 2021

2:30 p.m.

Room 419, Dirksen Senate Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Ranking Member Sen. Roger Wicker

Some of my colleagues and I had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Tsikhanouskaya during her visit to Washington this summer. I was impressed by her sense of duty to the people of Belarus and to securing the unconditional release of political prisoners, including her own husband, who has been in prison for over a year. Many of us in Congress have been shocked by the cruelty of Alexander Lukashenko against his own people — and we’ve been inspired by the Belarusian citizens who risk their jobs and even their lives to defy him. Last month, several colleagues and I came together to show our support for Belarusians by establishing the bipartisan Free Belarus Caucus, which I am proud to co-chair.

In 2017, I led a congressional delegation to Minsk for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s Annual Session. During our visit, we met with Mr. Lukashenko. No one had any delusions that the Mr. Lukashenko was committed to democracy. He had already used violence and threats to suppress dissent. But back then, we had some cause to hope that he had been sobered by Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine. We wanted to believe that his faltering efforts to reform Belarus’s economy and engage constructively with the West was more than cynical political maneuvering.



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But his true colors became obvious in August of 2020 the moment his power came under threat. Faced with thousands of Belarusians taking to the streets demanding free and fair elections, Mr. Lukashenko ran to the Kremlin for help. He ordered his thugs to beat protestors in the streets and throw them in prisons to be tortured. It is now abundantly clear that Mr. Lukashenko cares about nothing beyond self-preservation and will do anything to stay in power. Because of his ruthlessness, hundreds of innocent Belarusians are now stuck behind bars.

This is a dangerous situation for many, and I know that some of you, along with your families, friends, and colleagues, have put your own safety at risk to help your fellow citizens. We admire your courage and look forward to hearing from you today.